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## ABSTRACT

Personal experiences in public schools and in higher education are described that influenced a writer's decision to become a teacher and the teacher's subsequent development of a high school citizenship curriculum. Reasons for emphasizing critical thinking are discussed. The reactions of students, aged 14-19, in the most advanced level of a English as a Second Language (ESL) program are reported when asked for personal opinions about American citizenship, news of their native countries, and the content of school textbooks. Three areas of instruction are also described: changes in the physical arrangement of the classroom, inclusion of a unit on experienced-based learning, and student feedback on what the unit would contain. Approaches to enhancing interaction among ESL students are noted, as well methods for teaching the students essay and journal writing. Contains 12 references. (LB)

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## Citizenship Education: The Three S's—Self, School, and State (Excerpts)

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*Powerlessness and confusion in daily life can only be understood through critical thinking. Critical thinking is a fundamental pre-condition for an autonomous and self-motivated public or citizenry. Its decline would threaten the future of democratic, social, cultural, and political forms.*

Aronowitz

### BACKGROUND

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When I applied to the College of Education to pursue an M.Ed. in Second Languages and Cultures in the summer of 1989 I had many reasons for doing so, the most important one being that I felt a desire to help younger people with something that I did not personally take seriously until I was almost 27 years old: education. I had gone through my public elementary and secondary education occasionally reading a text but mostly being concerned with all those facets of adolescence extraneous to the academic curriculum. My early school years were filled with experiencing my adolescence while minimally coming to grips with academic necessities.

As I entered the University I began my pursuit of the next "required hurdle in life" with the same enthusiasm I had had in high school. I really was in school only because I had been blessed from birth with the intellectual aptitude that "the system" required. I did become somewhat more interested in my coursework, but as I now reflect back on why this was so I can only recall that I felt that I was doing things in college that I could "use" later in some profession. The things I looked forward to the most during my first two years at college were the Saturday afternoon Big Eight Conference football games and the social life on my coed dorm floor.

My lack of involvement in my education suddenly changed when I travelled to Europe in the summer between my Junior and Senior years at college and I found myself in the midst of something very foreign. Almost everything I saw I did not understand. I was suddenly not able to "just be myself" and continue functioning based on what I knew. I began thinking about why things in Europe were the way they were. It is, I believe, the first time in my life that I began thinking about my thinking. In a Piagetian sense I was finally a formal operational thinker at twenty.

After completing my Bachelor of Science I moved to West Germany where I lived and worked for three and one-half years. During the next few years I was involved in many discussions with people and began fundamentally questioning why I grew up in America the way that I did. I returned to America in 1983 attempting to further my career in agriculture, but my desires were elsewhere. Finally, in 1987 I enrolled in the College of Liberal Arts at the University of Minnesota in a German Studies program, something I would have excoriated anyone else for doing had it been four years earlier.

I greatly enjoyed my studies and I pursued them with a passion that I could not really explain. I came to the conclusion at some point during that liberal arts study that I finally had come to enjoy learning for its own sake. I was deeply involved in my studies and I found myself relating most of the things I was studying to personal my life. I was reading a lot of eighteenth and nineteenth-century German writings and I had been especially impressed with one individual and his feelings on education. The eighteenth-century German Wilhelm von Humboldt was the founder of what is today's German "gymnasium" or advanced placement secondary school system. Von Humboldt wrote about education as an aesthetic experience, one in which each person must consciously embark on a voyage to learn about him- or herself and how that person fits into the scheme of the world. His concept of educating mankind is referred to as "bildung," which I can only vaguely translate into English as "a complete molding of one into a whole person." The process does not imply training, but rather "educating" each person so that s/he appreciates the values of a liberal, humanistic education. The core argument of von Humboldt's theory is, "the real purpose of the human being is to develop his or her potential for wholeness in the fullest and most balanced way, and freedom is the first absolute prerequisite for this development" (von Humboldt, 1954). He felt that the key to this 'freedom' is that each person re-

ceive an education in which s/he is always learning and, most importantly, is learning about learning. Each person receives that education with the ultimate goal being to get to the "business of improving the nation" (von Humboldt, 1981).

These things I was learning had meaning to me and I was *consciously experiencing* them. The learning was so much fun that I decided that I wanted to teach. I kept thinking that it would have been so much better if I had just begun learning earlier and I hoped someday to be able to convince high school students that they should begin learning at an earlier age.

Meanwhile, I would tell my peers about my desire to teach in high school and they would mostly laugh at me, deriding me as being foolish for attempting to think that I could really take high schools and high school students seriously. This bothered me, since I knew well that much of what I was hearing seemed to be true. I had not taken high school seriously, so why should other people do so? As a matter of fact, even American society itself did not seem to take high schools seriously! I was just about to enter an advanced teacher certification program and I seemed to be the only person who really believed that it was the best thing for me to do. Many of my peers jeered me and said I was entering an intellectual wasteland that should more appropriately be referred to as some sort of full-time babysitting service. People would tell me that they really admired my decision to enter education. But, they did not see how I could relinquish one profitable profession to enter another in which the term "professional" would be used only ironically to describe teachers.

I was troubled at the time for many reasons. Would I like teaching? Would people respect me? Would I learn from this experience? Would I feel satisfied with my peers? Why had my school experience been the way it was? Was it because of me or was it because of them? Had I now somehow become destined to the fringes of society by believing that learning was fun? Would the M.Ed. program be a traditional teacher training program where mainly pedagogical theories and lesson planning ruled the day? Most importantly, I questioned whether I could continue to find the intellectual stimulation that I had come to enjoy in the past few years. In spite of all these questions I began the M.Ed. program hoping at best not to be terribly disappointed with what I would be asked to do.

### *The Recent Past: The M.Ed. Program*

At the time I entered the Postbaccalaureate program, I had read a few documents addressing the state of education in America today. These mostly were the pronouncements of well known and widely "respected" individuals or the blue-ribbon reports that various presidents of the United States had commissioned. I had listened to the past three presidents bemoan the state of American education. I had listened to the William Bennett debate about the changing of the Stanford University freshman reading list. Most recently I have listened to the "Education President" and his goal that America's schools be number one in the world in the

physical and social sciences by the year 2000.

I was not exactly sure how I should interpret all of these messages but I was sure that the American public was having similar problems. One thing I had come to believe was that education is a very political issue. However, everyone seemed to be just concerned enough with it to talk a lot about it. But that seemed to be where the great debate always ended. I wanted to go beyond the periphery of the five-thirty national news coverage but I did not know how or where to begin. At this point the M.Ed. program provided me with the necessary assistance.

From the very beginning the staff of the program seemed to be wanting to approach education from a different perspective. When the students assisted the staff in formulating the syllabus for fall term I knew we were dealing with a very novel approach. The staff actually asked us for our input into the course content and then followed up by inviting us to the "rap sessions" the staff held to discuss the progress we were making. This was all very new and exciting, needless to say unexpected, and I found myself beginning to think about education and learning in a much different context. I saw the staff and students actually working and learning together. We were discussing what we were doing and learning together about what that was. The emphasis was not at all on a product but on something the staff was calling a *process*. This process has the key feature of truly learning about learning.

With the syllabus in place and the atmosphere in the "classroom" having been established as quite egalitarian I was quite enthused to see what materials we would be using to learn how we were to become teachers. The first essay I remember reading was an excerpt from a text written by one who was for me at that time some obscure Brazilian philosopher—Paulo Freire. The title of the text was *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. It has since become the cornerstone of my philosophy of education and Freirian texts fill a large portion of space in my private library. The essay we read discussed what Freire calls the "banking" concept of education whereby "the scope of action allowed the students extends only as far as them receiving, filing, and storing the deposits" (Freire, 1970). These deposits are the unrelated bits and pieces of information that they receive in school instruction. Freire refutes the Lockian Blank Slate belief of the mind and maintains that students are by nature inquiring individuals. The important point here is that they must be given the chance to inquire, the result being the establishment of what Freire terms student *conscientização* (consciousness heightening) (Freire, 1973). This *conscientização* requires that the students and the teachers enter into critical analysis of and dialogue with each other on their own life situations. This is also referred to as experienced-based education; the instructors draw from the immediate lives of students to begin the learning process.

This was all fine in the abstracted safety of the University; however, I was not sure then and I am not sure now exactly how one goes about creating an environment in the classroom that would accommodate Freire's beliefs. Much of Freire's discussion and many of his concerns developed out of his work with the

poor and illiterate in Recife, Brazil. I was not sure how one might be able to apply his theories to American classrooms. . . .

. . . As I continued reading other Freirian texts such as his most recent one *Learning to Question* I began expanding my circle of authors. Freire has a large following in a segment of American pedagogy commonly called Critical Pedagogy. Some of the authors I have been most influenced by are Henry Giroux, Ira Shor, Michael Hartoonian, Stanley Aronowitz, and Michael Apple. These people are all believers in Freirian theory but the added focus they offered me was their applicability to the American classroom setting. Some of the common features that link their theories and writings include the following five characteristics:

1. Teachers and students strive to learn together in hopes that each of them can link school to the imperatives of a critical democracy (Giroux, 1988). This is possible only by giving students a role in determining their curriculum.
2. Educators should strive to evoke critical thinking about self and school in their students. Only after one has consciously thought about one's situation will one be able to act.
3. Students are humans and as such they are subjects that must act upon objects. This dichotomy between subject and object goes back in time to the moment when Aristotle wrote the first words and man was thereafter confronted with a separation of "I" from "Me." Kant describes education as the process of man becoming Man (Kant, 1926). Of importance for this paper is that students must not passively sit and absorb information. They learn by doing and creating their own lives.
4. Schools must act as transformers and not just transmitters of cultural values. Students must learn to enter into dialogues questioning what it is they see around them.
5. A definite link between schools and politics exists. In fact, they demand that the schools and the students recognize the political nature of education and incorporate discussions into the curriculum of the schools, the result being that schools will begin to explicitly address the political nature of education. . . .

. . . What I hope to do in the second section of this paper is to describe a

few of the things I did in an ESL classroom in which I was teaching. The process I am going through only allows itself to be seen as a product only when I write it down. But as the next thought enters my mind that product is again transformed into a process. This is indeed the ideal learning situation in which one consistently molds, shapes, reshapes, and redefines what one is doing. This process is a prerequisite for defining a new, improved approach to education that does not have as its goal the mere transmission of what we perceive to be "knowledge." Instead, the goal is to create new forms of knowledge through doing. As Dewey said, "The society that not only changes, but which has the ideal that such change will improve it, will have different standards and methods of educating from one which aims simply at perpetuation of its own customs" (Boggs, 1984). . . .

. . . I entered the classroom the first day as a preservice teacher with my goal being to write as many observations as I could. We had been discussing in our postbaccalaureate program an ethnographic approach to classroom observation, and this seemed like a very reasonable way to record what I saw. The idea is that one should be as unobtrusive as possible in attempting to record the classroom environment. Such things as interactions among students, interactions among students and staff, and the make-up of the school itself would be of possible interest to the observer who wishes to define the culture of the classroom.

After about one week of observing and writing I began collecting my thoughts and reviewing my notes. (1) The arrangement of the room was such that most of the interactions in the classroom were between teacher and student. Very seldom did I record students interacting with one another—except of course when student interaction was the focus of the activity. Spontaneous student interaction with another student was rarely seen. (2) The teacher was providing the majority of the information. S/he would be standing in front of the class writing information on the chalkboard, many times asking the students for choral responses. When the activities were not teacher directed the structure of the lesson seemed to be coming out of a workbook. The students were required to supply the missing pieces of information. i.e., fill-in the blanks, true/false, or matching. (3) The content of the class seemed to be grammatically-based. The course was a language course. However, we had been discussing at the University and I had been reading how instruction could be organized around thematic content units instead of around grammatical units. The students did not seem to be actively involved in the course material and there seemed to be no link between school and anything else in the outside world. (4) I did not see how the students' higher order thinking skills were being challenged. The majority of the material that was being covered required perfunctory rote memorization of a block of material. The activities all seemed to have as their goal the completion of rigidly-defined prescriptive notions of the "knowledge" one should learn. Nowhere did I see "knowledge" being subordinated to thinking. There existed proper responses that the teacher expected the students to be able to give. (5) Finally, and this is

the most troubling, I did not record a single time that they protested. They appeared simply to resign themselves to performing according to the teacher's best judgment!!

I spent the next two weeks trying to determine what it was I wanted to do in this classroom. The students were the most advanced level of ESL at the school where I was working but they came from different grade levels and exhibited varying levels of English proficiency. The most interesting characteristic of the class was that there were students from five different countries. Most of the students were Southeast Asian, but I did have some Russian and Korean students. I visited with my cooperating teacher about some of my interests and asked her what she would like me to do with the students. She said that it was totally up to me and that I had no restrictions—within reason, that is. I thought that it might be a good idea to ask the students a bit about themselves, so I began by designing a questionnaire.

### *Deciding on a Curriculum*

I handed out the student information sheet two days before I was to begin teaching and I asked the students to return it to me the next day. Several of the questions asked for general information: age, native country, languages spoken, and hobbies. However, I was quite interested in some personal opinions, as well, so I asked such questions as:

- 1) What do you like (and dislike) about living in the U.S.?
- 2) If you remain in the U.S. will you become a citizen?
- 3) Are you satisfied with the news you read in the American press pertaining to your native country?
- 4) If you were able to write the school textbooks and help determine what students learn in school, how would you do it?

The responses to the first two questions varied from no answer to "I like everything." However, two people did write that the thing they most disliked was that they had "no nation here" and that "they are discriminated against." I found this very interesting and thought the chance existed to dwell on this topic in classroom discussions. The response to the last two questions (#3 and #4) was about as mixed as with the first two. Again, I did record two interesting responses, both to the fourth question: a) "You must respect the teacher and behave to friend and the old man, God." b) "I learn from the teacher."

Out of the eighteen forms I received back—I handed out twenty-one—twelve students indicated that they wished to go to college after graduating from high school. I found this quite interesting given that the majority of the students either did not feel like filling out the forms completely or they had no opinions.

On the questions where the students were to provide personal opinions, only eight wrote more than two sentences. One response that was written more than any other to the question "What do you like (dislike) in America?" was the word FREEDOM. I found this on ten forms. I decided that the curriculum could include three topics from these forms: (1) I would develop the concept of freedom; (2) racism—which appeared in response to three "What do you like (dislike) in America?" questions; and (3) the topic of curriculum content and who decides it.

The dilemma now was how to develop these ideas so that I could reach the students and get them involved. The ages in the class ranged from fourteen to nineteen (and possibly older) and the grade levels from seventh to eleventh grade. I had to consider that I had not only different language abilities but also that people were processing information at many different levels. I decided that it would be best to speak with the class about some of my ideas before proceeding. Anyway, I was interested in the student-teacher generated curriculum ideas that I had read about in Freire's and Ira Shor's texts, and so an open discussion with the students was ideal.

The first day was spent with introductions and I explained to the students why I was going to be working with them for the next six weeks. They seemed to accept this information unceremoniously; I hadn't expected much else. We finished the class by beginning to discuss the class rules. I told them that they should think about the existing rules and decide if they liked them or not. Emotions remained rather subdued.

My mind was reeling after that first day as I tried to come to grips with the realities of the first day in class. All I could think of were the many blank stares and the few responses I experienced. How was I to try to begin with my ideals of "citizenship education" when the majority of the class couldn't even spell those two words?? I thought to myself that the students were just waiting for me to tell them to open their texts to page so-and-so; at which time an immense sigh of relief would go out from all parties in the room—including myself. This was, of course, the commonly accepted way of doing things. I couldn't let myself down, however, and I would go in the next day full of enthusiasm. I immediately reached for Henry Giroux's text *Schooling and the Struggle for Public Life* (1988), hoping to find the needed tips. I decided that night that I was going to focus on **three** main areas of instruction:

(1) I would try to fundamentally change the physical arrangement of the classroom. I wanted to achieve something other than the hierarchical relationship that existed currently between students and teacher. (2) I would try to include a unit that would have as its focus experienced-based learning. My coop teacher had told me that the students would have to pass a competency writing exam in four weeks. Why not have them begin by writing a personal essay about why they came to America. (3) I wanted to ask the students for their feedback on what they would like to learn and then we could develop and research the unit together.

### *Physical Arrangement*

We had been reading a lot about the way classrooms are arranged and how those arrangements can play a very significant role in either enhancing or discouraging discussions. I observed, in almost all classrooms that I saw, the traditional straight-rowed seating structure, and I decided that I would rearrange the chairs. I left the chairs in the rows they had been in for the first week and then the next Monday as we were beginning class, I asked the students if they had ever sat in anything but rows. No one had, and so I asked them if they thought it might be advantageous to change the make-up of the room. No one had an opinion, so I asked them to push the rows into a circle and see how they liked that. Fifteen seconds hadn't expired before a student announced to the entire class that he could now see people whom he previously hadn't known were in the class! There was a lot of visiting among students and suddenly a male asked if they might introduce themselves. I agreed, and from that moment a number of aspects of the class began to change.

First of all, the amount of interaction between students increased immensely. Certainly a lot of what was being discussed was not related to the lesson; however, I felt that communication was the key to this class and, furthermore, that communication among students, and not just between myself and the students, was needed. The first thing I noticed was that the students were grouping themselves into ethnic groups and speaking their native languages. So, I asked them if they might like to choose their own seating arrangement and that they should keep in mind that we were in this class to speak English. No one moved. I told them that I would assign them seats if they didn't try to mix with people from other countries. About one-half of the class then moved voluntarily and the volume level decreased accordingly.

This was just fine, since now we could spend time introducing ourselves and coercing each other into talking with the newly found "friends." I did the majority of the coercing, but what emerged was that slowly some people did start speaking. I mingled with the class listening to the students and observing that many of them were watching me and looking at their friends with whom they previously had been sitting. I asked what the major difference was for them now that they were sitting elsewhere, and the resounding response was that they couldn't speak because they couldn't understand one another. I announced that that was fantastic and I asked the students why I might feel this way. After about a thirty-second pause, a Russian woman said, "Because we must speak English." (One big thing I learned this year is to just simply wait for a student to say something after having asked a question. The ringing silence tends to bother students more than it does the instructor!)

The next positive aspect of this new seating arrangement was that the students could not only see one another, but I felt that I could see them better too. The classroom appeared to be more open and, although the dialogue was still quite limited in the first few weeks, I did have students telling me continually

that they enjoyed being able to see everyone. Eventually, one side effect was much more dialogue among students.

### *Class Rules*

One specific topic of discussion that I will now address, and which I think the new seating arrangement greatly benefited, was deciding to ask the students to discuss the classroom rules. I was always thinking of how I might bring "citizenship education" into the classroom, and I stumbled onto the idea of asking the students to vote on the discipline rules. There had been three simple rules before I took the class over, and I decided to just ask the students if they felt comfortable with those three rules. Amazingly, about five students raised their hands and began telling me what they felt the rules meant to them. Shortly thereafter, some students began discussing the rules among *themselves*. I am convinced that changing the chairs around allowing the students to speak among themselves, and continually encouraging student interaction brought these first remarks about classroom discipline. Of course, not all students were participating. The most shy were the Hmong women and the younger students. However, I felt that a portion of this was due to cultural socialization. I was able to learn a great deal from the more reticent students, but only via the journal writing, when they supplied me with information about their feelings.

One final thing I noticed after having altered the seating arrangement was that space was more flexible and open for student movement. Both the students and I could move quickly from the rear to the front of the room. My interaction patterns were not just left to right in front of the class as they had been, but now I moved left to right and in between among the students. I felt much "closer" to them, since I could easily move from one group to the next. Furthermore, when we wanted to work in small groups—something else that was totally foreign to this class—the students quickly rearranged the desks to get into partner or small group setting.

In sum, I feel that something as minor as seating arrangement can dramatically alter the communicative nature of the classroom. Most importantly, I found that after initial reluctance on the students' part, they began to talk with each other and not just with me. I envisioned Freire's idea of "horizontal relationship between persons" (Freire, 1973). The idea was to establish loving, humble, hopeful, frustrating, critical dialogue among all people in the classroom, resulting in communication.

## THE FIRST WRITING ASSIGNMENT

My cooperating teacher had told me that the students would be writing a short essay four weeks after I took over instruction of the class. This was part of a school district graduation policy. She told me that the majority of the students had not written much, so I decided that it would be good for them to begin. I

chose the topic for the first essay, thinking that it would be easier to coordinate all the students, and classroom discussions about writing might be easier if we were all talking about one type of essay. I decided on the personal essay because I had been doing a lot of reading about ESL student writing; most of the scholars I had read suggested beginning with personal experiences. I announced the essay topic to the students—Why I Came to America?—and their reactions were mixed. A few of the students (all Russian) complained that they had been asked many times since coming to America why they had come. I told them that they should maybe think about whether or not their opinions had changed, and if so, how. Rather than just writing about why they had come they could write about how their perceptions had changed. The Russian students all had come into the ESL class with previous knowledge of the concept of writing. They were in the course mainly to increase their fluency in English and acquire new vocabulary words.

I introduced the concept of writing drafts of the essay, something which again appeared extremely foreign to most students. I even had a number of students, after they had handed in the second draft of their paper, ask me why they had to continually write about the same topic. So much for my being able to explain the writing process to them! The students who had had previous exposure to writing were the ones who were most receptive to a process approach.

A second writing assignment was to have the students work in pairs, go to the library and research a topic of their choice. Additionally, I made the assignment an introduction to the library by asking the librarian to talk to the class about using the card catalog, the Reader's Guide, and the reference section of the library. Before beginning I told the students that they would have to work with a student from another country, the goals being meeting a new friend and speaking English. They objected vehemently, so we had to spend the next two days before going to the library talking about the importance of intercultural communication. This led to some very interesting discussions as the students really opened up about the problems they had working with each other. Not being able to understand one another due to the accents and different interests and backgrounds were the usual reasons given for not wanting to work with new partners.

I persisted and the students ended up learning much about each other's diverse backgrounds. We had discussions about the Vietnam War, the Khmer Rouge, discrimination against Jews in the Soviet Union, and discrimination in America. The students were quite surprised to discover that their home countries were so different. Most Asians had come from the jungle, and most Russians had come from large urban areas; yet they had almost all come to America for the same reason—to escape some sort of persecution. The discussions became quite animated at times and I just took a place at the side of the room and listened to the students discuss.

The third writing assignment was to research a topic of interest and then to give an oral report about it to the class. Most of the reports provided the students with new information about the interests of their fellow classmates. I asked them

to take notes so that we could discuss the reports. The discussions were usually *quite* brief, the exception being a discussion about plagiarism. One woman had copied out of an encyclopedia that monkeys eat other animals. She was challenged by a classmate, and she could only respond that she had read something in the book; unable to understand it fully, she just wrote it down. The challenging student asked her if she would always just believe and write down something she didn't understand. We expanded the discussion in two ways: (1) the importance of understanding what you read, and (2) not just accepting what someone says without questioning it.

The students all said that giving reports to classes, having to stand in front of the class, and following up with a discussion was something totally new. I found such an activity to have immense value for many reasons: (1) the students learned to work together on a common project—we discussed the need to work with people whom they wouldn't know after leaving school and entering the workplace, (2) they acquired academic skills in using the library, writing the report or drawing accompanying sketches, and note-taking during the report presentations; and (3) they were forced to communicate with one another during all stages of the researching, presenting, and the follow-up discussing. I found the exercise to include all language modalities, and it offered many chances to digress from the immediate topic at hand and treat other important issues in "real-life," i.e., backgrounds of students, racism, speech problems, etc. Such an exercise gives the school a much broader, more effective context in which to treat issues that are frequently buried in a textbook.

## DIALOGUE JOURNALS

The idea of writing in journals came about for two reasons: (1) I had read about it in my research at the university and I found the journal writing I was doing at the university to have a lot of value, and (2) I was having trouble bringing a certain segment of the class into the classroom discussions, namely, the younger Asian students and the Hmong women. The entries were very personal, ranging in breadth from a personal account of a male having to watch as his father was executed by the Khmer Rouge, to a woman telling me that the biggest problem with America is that her people have no nation and no king here. She went on to explain how she and her family had been persecuted in Thailand, and that they had hoped America would be different. Unfortunately, she was in a land where her people were dependent on welfare, and most of the Americans didn't care about them. And worse yet, the Blacks would fight with the Hmong, hitting Hmong people and stealing money from them. She went into quite a bit of detail telling me about her uncle being beaten by a group of adolescent Blacks. She just wanted to go back home. All of this came from a woman who did not say ten sentences openly in class in the six weeks I worked with them.

What I discovered from the journals was that the students could write about

personal matters and they were actually quite willing to, once they felt that they could trust me, and that the information would be kept anonymous.

I feel that the features of the classroom I experimented with and have just described represent a productive start at changing the classroom. The students were required to enter into a process of finding out on their own the information they needed to complete an assignment. Change in the classroom is not easy—the first major hurdle is to convince the students themselves that there are other ways to learn.

## REFLECTIONS ON MY CLASSROOM EXPERIENCE

These reflections combine my experiences in the public schools and at the University. The question-answer format in our post-bac seminars has been instrumental in my establishing a more open classroom in the schools. The emphasis on the *process* instead of simply a finished *product* has allowed me to better define what I feel education to be. This *process* is the single most important element I have tried bringing into the secondary school classroom with me this year. It has taken the form of dialogue journals where students have, for example, given me feedback on what they thought we should do differently in class. I have held weekly "Rap Sessions" where we have discussed classroom management, curriculum content, or any other potential problem areas where students have wished to voice their opinions.

I feel that these are some of the more progressive features of my citizenship curriculum. A dialogue has been established, trust has been discovered, and hopefully learning has been enhanced. The most positive feedback I received was from my own students. The majority of them felt that what we did in class was somewhat important. While the classroom management and my different approach to classroom discussions was much different than what the students were accustomed to, they did not renounce what we did. I must bear in mind that many students will not be receptive to a lot of my ideas simply because of the way school has already formed them. For example, I had students constantly telling me that I gave them too much freedom in classes. Many told me that I must be a stricter disciplinarian. Of course, I was trying to do the exact opposite by giving them the opportunity to create their own agenda! . . .

. . . Only by listening to students and their many concerns and interests will we as educators be able to begin tapping into their energies and abilities. In the past year we learned much at the university seminars about involving students in the learning process. This is not a new idea; what is new is that we as educators actually tried to move these ideas from our university classrooms into our elementary and secondary settings. This involved risks. Students will most likely not be initially receptive to drastic changes in the traditional classroom. Students must be given a "voice" in what happens in the schools but they must also be

willing to take on more responsibility. Elements such as classroom management should become negotiable, with students creating some of the conditions and then having to bear the consequences. Responsible, involved student-directed action in schools will translate into responsible, citizen-directed action in society. However, **everyone** must enter into this social contract as partners. . . .

. . . Just how teachers act remains to be decided. It is necessary that we sincerely invite and actively involve everyone. In the schools this requires students, educators, administrators and parents working together to understand what the role of education in our society should be. In order to understand where we are today, we must take the time to learn how we have come here. For schools this means rewriting curricula, making them student-educator generated and experience-based. The experiences of everyone must be included in this process. This is the process of writing **our** history and it will require a unique approach to learning; it is not beyond our abilities, but it involves risks.

Many people are adverse to risk and shun such a challenge, waiting for someone else to act or the next day to arrive. Amazingly, every day that we wait for something to happen we must remember we are taking just as large of a risk. We must act and begin writing the next chapter in our history. In order to do this, however, we must reread the previous chapters in hopes of gaining insight. It disturbs me when I think that we might have only become future oriented. Are we so disturbed by the past?

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